

Community Building



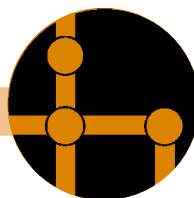
Access



Content



Diversity



Infrastructure



Literacy

Email and the Web have quickly spun into our lives, but what effects have they had on our ability to build community? Has technology connected people to communities or isolated them? Are we spending more time with our computers or with each other?

The Internet has certainly changed the way that we think about communication and community building. In this age of mobility, our communities are not only formed around a physical location; they cut across borders and/or exist entirely online in “virtual communities.” Information and communication technologies, when applied to community, can foster dialogue and reinforce connectedness. Used to their greatest potential, these technologies can:

- build relationships and community unity
- encourage face-to-face interaction
- enable sharing of resources
- support and promote community assets
- promote community development
- be applied to building neighborhood area networks inclusive of residents, schools, organizations and businesses
- Build networks of interest and promote commonality across geographic boundaries.

This set of community building indicators covers participation in community groups and electronic participation via web and email. The Internet is certainly stretching our thinking about community building and communications. Those who take advantage of the web and email may be at an advantage for delivering services, recruiting members, fundraising, marketing and advocacy. Still, the web and email are another in a long line of tools. From drums to telephone trees, information technologies have long been used to rally community groups together. The challenge lies in effective applications: how to use the tools and, perhaps more importantly, making choices about when not to use them.

When developing these indicators, we found that sense of place continues to be very important to Seattle residents. Seattle has strong and caring residents working hard to improve their neighborhoods. Local institutions and businesses often rely on local support. The City of Seattle also places a high priority on promoting residents’ sense of ownership and responsibility for their community. For that reason, these indicators focus on measuring local communities and information technology rather than trying to assess virtual communities.

As individuals, government, and the private sector all get wired, nonprofits, small businesses and neighborhood associations must follow suit. Information technology has become an essential part of the toolbox for community builders and human service providers. Since their success is critical to the well-being of our city, this indicators project also took a measure of the IT health of local nonprofits (non-government organizations). Additional research is being conducted on small businesses.

Electronic Participation in Local Community Groups

Healthy communities are active. Residents get to know each other and work together on common goals. The interests that bring our communities together cover a broad spectrum; they may include neighborhood associations, school and parent groups, sports clubs, and arts, religious or cultural organizations. Together they weave the fabric of our communities and our quality of life. Involvement in these community groups provides a measure of the extent to which residents are engaged. Their use of email and the web provides a measure of the reliance on these tools. These numbers should also be applied to considering the risk of alienating those with less access. As email and the web are relied upon as the dominant communication medium, those with less technology access and literacy may be left out of the loop.

Measurements

Seattle Residents Participating in Community Groups	62%
Groups that Participants Identified as Using Email to Communicate	73%
Groups that Participants Identified as Having a Web Site	55%



Many Seattle residents are active in community groups, and many of those groups incorporate electronic participation into their work.

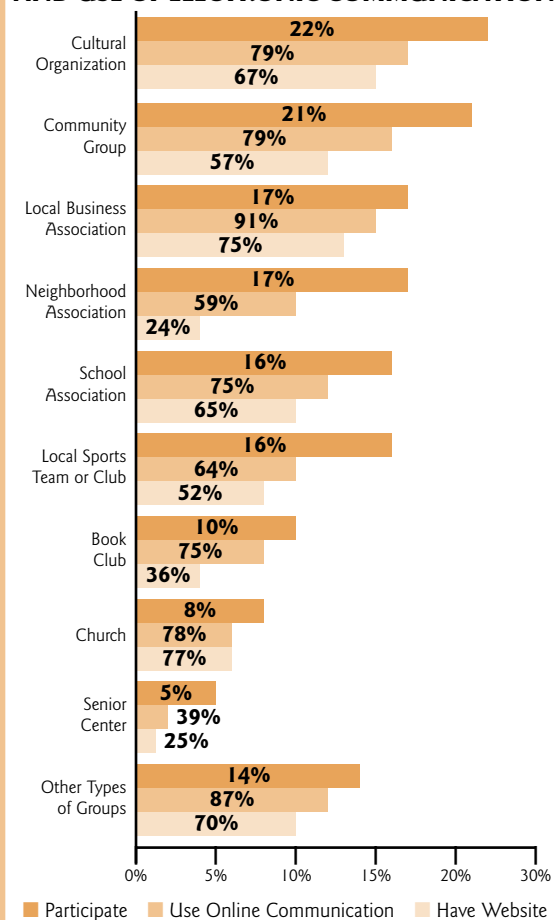
More than three in five (62%) residents participate in at least one neighborhood or community organization.

Those who participate in community groups were asked if that group has a web page or uses email to communicate with members. Almost half (48%) of those surveyed indicated that at least one of the groups they participate in uses email or the Internet to communicate with members. Those who participate in local business associations were the most likely to report that their group uses email or the Internet to communicate, followed closely by those who participate in cultural organizations and those who participate in churches. Only 39 percent of those who participate in senior centers indicate that the group uses email or the Internet to communicate with members.

Fewer respondents (39%) indicated that the community group(s) in which they participate

have a web page. Members of local business associations (75%), local cultural organizations (67%), and school associations (65%) were the most likely to report having web pages, while senior centers and neighborhood associations were the least likely.

PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY GROUPS AND USE OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION



Source: 2000 Seattle IT Residential Survey

Use of Technology by Community Groups

Although surveying random residents about their participation in community groups is a good way to get an accurate sample or overall involvement, it is not the best way to learn about how technology is currently being used by community groups. By speaking directly with neighborhood and business group leaders, we can better measure the percentage of neighborhood organizations over time that are using email, listservs, and web sites as communication tools for their organizations. Learning about how communication methods change over time also provides important information about the way that newer technologies are, or are not, being adopted by community groups.

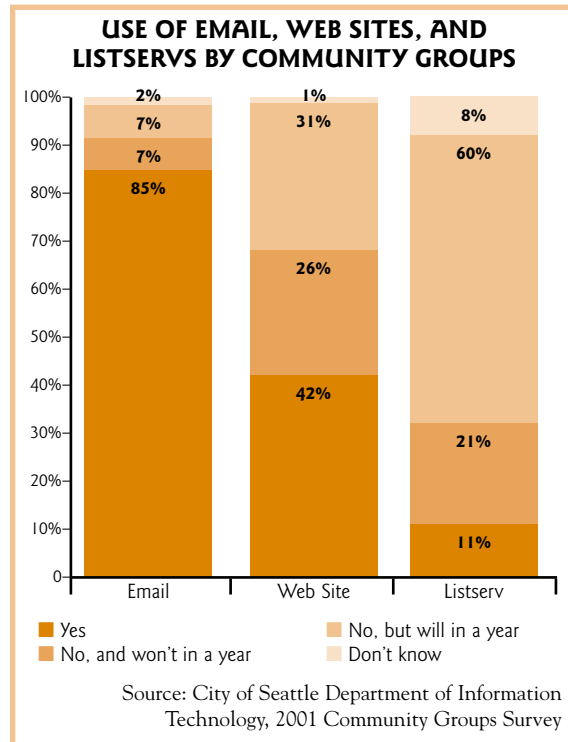
Measurements

Last contact with community group was by email (most common)	48%
Groups that use email to communicate	85%
Groups that use a listserv	11%
Groups that have a web site	42%

Computers and the Internet are being used to build and strengthen community and neighborhood groups in Seattle.

Email and web technology allow neighborhood leaders to communicate with members. They are also used to contact and mobilize large numbers of people while using minimal resources, organize events, increase exposure, raise the profile of a group, and bring in new members.

Many Seattle neighborhood groups use email as a primary communication method. Almost all of the neighborhood leaders that responded to our survey have a personal email address and 85% said they use email to communicate with members. A majority feels that email is very effective for that purpose.



Many groups have created web sites but would like to use them more effectively.

Almost half of the organizations surveyed currently have a web site; an additional 24% think they will have a web site within a year. However, there are mixed feelings about the effectiveness of their sites. Only one-quarter of



Instead of the information superhighway, I'm interested in the information bike path. I want to see the links that can be made at the local level from household to household, school to school, neighborhood to neighborhood.

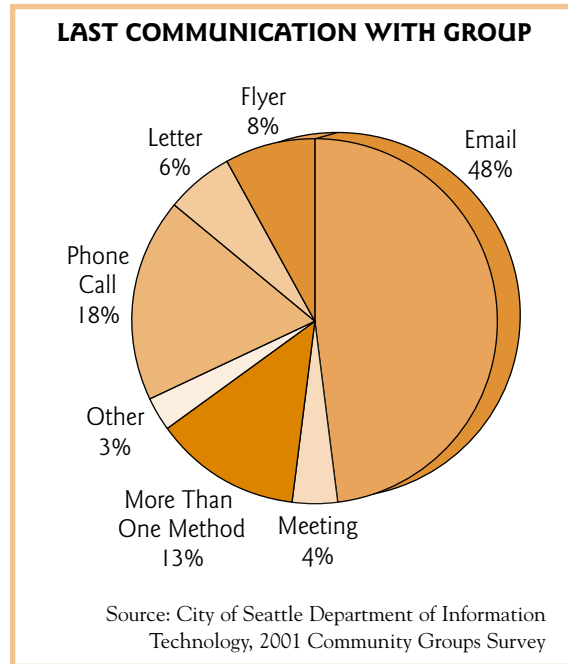
—Richard Conlin, Seattle City Council Member



those with web sites feel that their site is effective, while more than one-third feel that their site is not very or not at all effective. Resources, skills, and cost, including those related to updating content, are the greatest barriers to building effective sites.

Email is the most common way that group leaders are contacting other group members.

When asked how the last contact with group members was made, almost half (48%) of respondents stated that it was through email. Many of those that listed more than one method, included email as one of those methods as well. The next most popular method of contacting groups was phone calls at 18 percent.



The Internet—Breaking Down or Building Community?

Information Technology has an effect on the developments of communities, both geographic and non-geographic. With increasing use of the Internet, communities can easily transcend geographic boundaries. With the growth of these new communities, many are concerned about what the effect is going to be on the communities in which we live and work. Concerns about increased isolation as a result of technology usage are at the forefront, yet many argue that technology has allowed them to communicate and connect with more people than ever before. National and local research has struggled with this question, and reports have been released that support both views.

One of the most noteworthy and highly publicized findings was by the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society. Their report on the Internet and society found that the Internet is increasing isolation. As the preliminary findings state, “the more time people spend using the Internet, the more they lose contact with their social environment.”¹ However, just a few months later the Pew Internet and American Life Project released study findings that showed that email and the Internet has improved communication with friends and family members. Beyond just improving communication with family and friends, the Pew Study found that Internet users were actually more socially connected than non-users, and Internet users surveyed did not report any measurable decrease in their ties to their family and friends because of their involvement with the Internet.² On the local level, in a *Seattle Times* poll of Washington and Oregon residents conducted in September 2000, not a single respondent felt that the Internet was causing them to have less interaction with others. When asked, “On balance, would you say the Internet is expanding your interaction with other people? Or do you have less interaction with others than you used to?” 66 percent of respondents replied that the Internet is expanding their interaction with others.³

Technology Usage by Non-Profit Organizations

Non-profit and community based organizations play an important role in community building and sustainability. In order to effectively deliver services and develop the organization, it is becoming increasingly important for non-profits to have a sufficient level of information technology infrastructure. Funding challenges for non-profits often put them in a position of playing catch-up to industry standards and expectations. Varying types of service create varying technological needs for organizations. However, there is a basic technology infrastructure that should be in place for all organizations.

Measurement

IT Infrastructure Index Rating (between 0 and 100) for Seattle Organizations

63

What is Basic Technology Infrastructure for a Non-profit?

For the purposes of this indicator, basic technology infrastructure is defined by the following five criteria:

Organizations have a technology plan in place.

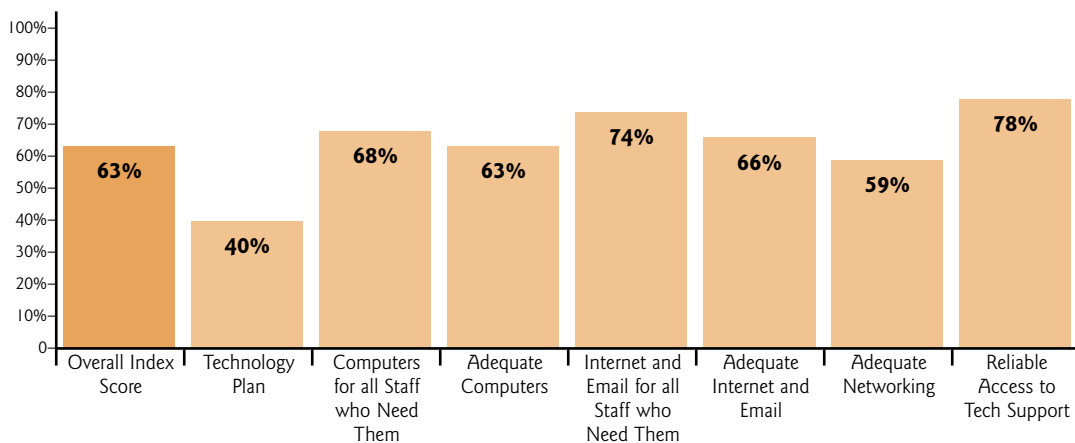
According to NPower, a local technology assistance organization for non-profits, all organizations should have a 2- or 3-year written technology plan that is integrated into the organization's overall strategic plan and/or

annual program plan. Many non-profits find themselves reacting to technological problems and developments on an *ad hoc* basis. A technology plan allows organizations to take a proactive approach to the use of computer technology.

All staff who need computers have them, and the computers are adequate for the needs of staff.

Technology should be assisting and facilitating the work of organizations, and not holding it up. Staff members who need to use computers in their work should have easy access. Just having access to computers isn't always enough—the computers at organizations should have the memory, software, and capabilities that staff need in order to complete their projects efficiently.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS



Source: City of Seattle Department of Information Technology, 2001 Non-Profits and Technology Survey



All staff who need access to the Internet and email have access, and the Internet and email systems are adequate for staff and organizational needs.

As with computers, Internet and email systems should be available to those staff who need them and adequate for organizational needs. One computer with Internet access in an office may be sufficient for some organizations, while others may need to have every computer connected.

A network adequate for the needs of the organization is in place.

Some organizations may not need a local area network, while others may need to be connected not only within the office, but also to a wider network of organizational sites. Organizations should define the level of networking that is suitable for their needs, and then work to have that in place.

The organization has reliable access to technology support.

Computer technology can drain an organization's resources if it is not functioning well. Work can be held up if computers that staff rely upon are not functioning. Organizations should have some form of reliable technology support, whether through a staff member, a consultant, or a volunteer.

The data here is part of a larger research project into technology usage within non-profits.⁴ This survey considered a broader scope of resources necessary to use information technology effectively and considered barriers. One of the questions on the survey asked what type of training or assistance would help their organization use technology more effectively. The most frequent response was staff training, requested by thirty-five percent of respondents. If staff do not have the training and skills to use the hardware and software effectively, the technology potential goes untapped.

Notes

- 1 Nie, Norman H. and Lutz Erbring. *Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report* (Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, February 17, 2000).
- 2 Pew Internet and American Life Project, *Tracking Online Life: How Women Use the Internet to Cultivate Relationships with Family and Friends*. 10 May 2000, p. 21.
- 3 From the raw data of the survey conducted by Elway Research for *The Seattle Times* and *Northwest Cable*

News, in collaboration with the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Summary of survey results was published in *The Seattle Times* on 24 September 2000.

- 4 See www.cityofseattle.net/tech/indicators/nporesults.htm